

Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children

WITCHTOWN MYSTERY SOLVED BY A STUDIOUS SMALL BOY WHO ACCIDENT- ALLY DISCOVERED A WISHING- STONE AND TOOK ADVAN- TAGE OF HIS KNOWLEDGE

THE people of Franklin township had puzzled over some very mysterious circumstances for many a year; in fact for so long that they had about made up their minds that they could not be explained except by saying that witches, wizards or fairies were at work.

To relate all of the queer things that had happened would take a whole book, but a few will suffice to show that very remarkable occurrences had made the village famous for miles around and given it the name of Witchtown.

Could one tell the true story of all the strange things that had happened he would produce a book equal to the Arabian Nights; but, of course, no one ever knew the true story until Herman Wirz discovered the facts that led to the telling of this tale.

Long ago the place began to be called Witchtown. In fact, it was so many years ago that even the oldest grandfathers said it was long before their time, and the strange events even then made a list like a city directory.

The inhabitants of Witchtown had grown so accustomed to astonishing occurrences that nothing amazed or disturbed them, for all the people who feared or disliked fairies, elves and wizards had moved away ages ago, leaving only those who looked upon such things as quite natural. So, when a new wonder was reported, people simply shrugged their shoulders and smiled; thinking, very naturally, that something would happen to them next.

Although the village was many leagues away from the sea, there stood, right in the centre of the grass-grown Common, a large ship, half rigged, as if plowing across a green sea. Every boy in the place played on her decks and knew each rope and spar as well as if he had been born in the ship's cabin.

They swarmed up the ratlines, climbed to the very top of the masts, fought marine battles on her decks, were pirates, naval officers, whalers or polar explorers by turns; set her sails or furled them like real seamen, weighed the anchors, took observations of the sun and calculated the latitude and longitude like real navigators, and many a boy really went to sea from Witchtown an able sailor, just because of what he had learned on the Blue Dolphin.

No one could tell whence came the ship; it had appeared there on the Common overnight, suddenly and mysteriously, as everything happened in Witchtown, and there it had stood for twenty-five years.

To a stranger arriving in the village it was a wondrous spectacle to behold—a ship rearing its tall masts from out a grove of great elms and maples—but everybody else had grown so used to it that it seemed quite natural.

Yet even Franklin township people admitted that the neighborhood of the mystic vessel was the most uncanny spot of all. It was known that there the most mysterious events occurred; something magical and weird invested the Common with a peculiar spell, but no one guessed what it was.

Right in front of the ship was a large black stone, a rounded boulder, half buried in the earth, smooth and polished, and it seemed as if it actually was a rock upon which the ship had almost driven her bows, but stopped in time to avoid a wreck as she sailed across the Common. This stone was called the Thunder Stone, and it was said to have fallen from the sky long ago when the Indians inhabited that region.

At any rate, the Indians, as well as the first white settlers, imputed a mysterious origin to it, and its shiny black surface helped to make it interesting. On one side it sloped away into the earth, and here were to be seen many curious markings, carved probably by the Indians long ago.

Rude, uncouth figures of men in boats, birds, deer and other animals so badly drawn as not to be recognized, but the children had determined exactly what each one meant.

Other marks, like the letters in ancient alphabets, were strewn across the polished stone surface as if queer-shaped bird's feet had marked it when it was soft and round; cup-like pits, too, were cut into it, but it was impossible to imagine for what purpose.

Scientists who came and looked at it gravely said that many a stone so marked was to be seen in every part of the country, but none of that strange, black, shining material. It was as black as coal, but hard as steel.

On a low hill that rose among the cornfields just at the end of the village was another wonder. It was a pie-plate, fifty feet across and ten feet deep.

The story told in Witchtown was that a hundred years ago and more a half-witted boy who watched the sheep for Squire Kuehnle had found this gigantic pie plate, and in it was a mince pie that filled it from rim to rim. He had claimed it as his own, and to the day of his death had declared that the fairies had given it to him.

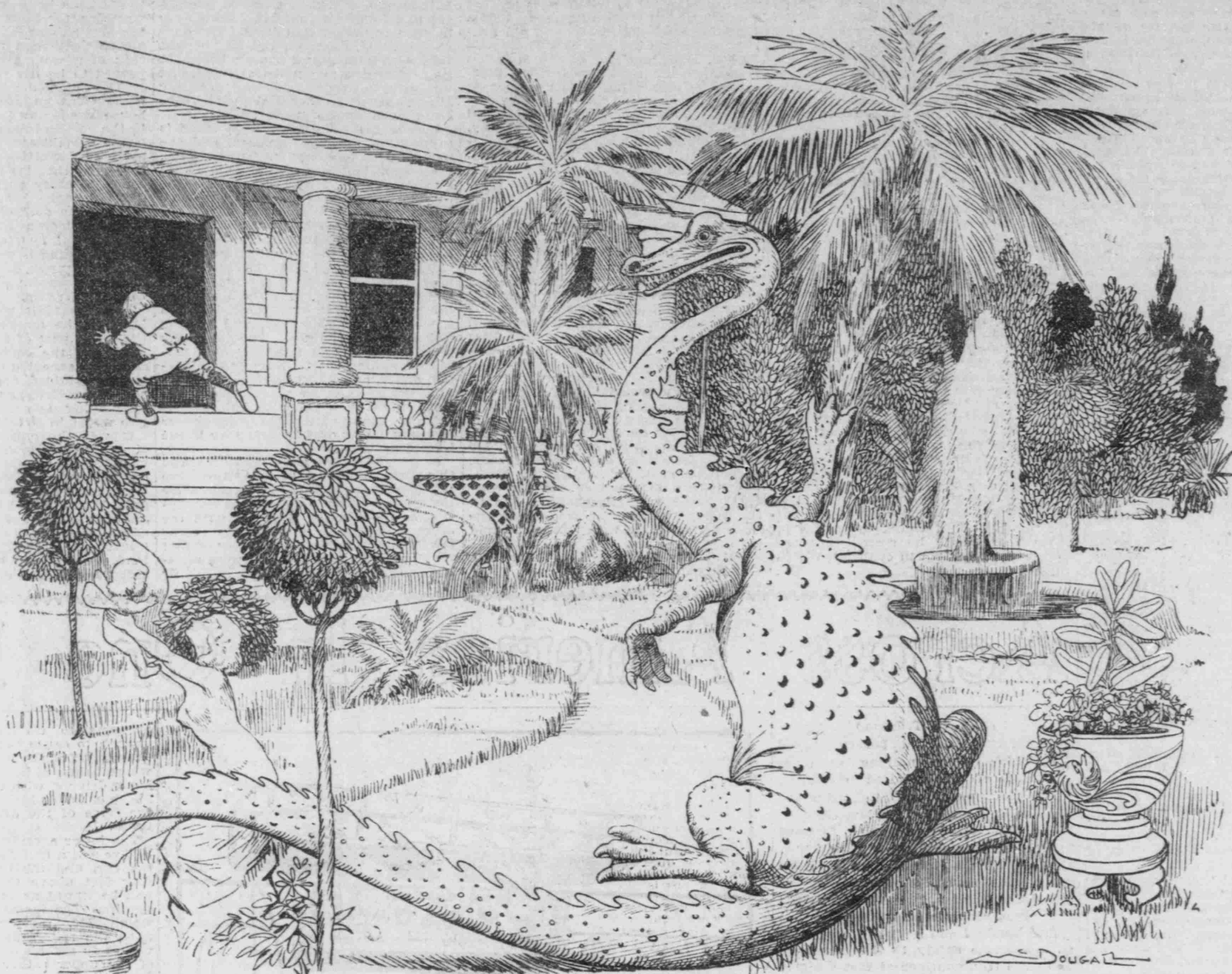
Of course the pie had been eaten up, but there lay the plate, usually filled with water, in which the village boys went swimming in the summer time and fished, too, for sunfish, which somebody had long ago placed there.

Just across the road from the Presbyterian church another marvel was to be seen. This was a well of fresh, sweet milk, from which the whole village was so plentifully supplied that nobody kept a cow, and this, too, dated back for more than a century. Always full to the brim with cold, rich milk, nothing was more prized by the villagers than this well.

Butter and cheese made from that milk were better than any made elsewhere, and brought such a price that the well alone would have made them rich. For it had been presented to the village when the owner died, and belonged to the township, and was about the only one of the village wonders that really benefited the entire place.

Opposite was the blacksmith shop. There was nothing peculiar about the appearance of the smithy, but here, too, was something marvelous. The blacksmith found every morning four new horse shoes lying on his forge, yet he never knew whence they came.

He had grown rich from the custom this queer circumstance brought him, for the fame of these shoes was widespread, because once fast to a horse's hoof they never wore out; so, as you may imagine, large sums were paid for them. They looked just like ordinary shoes, too, but they were undoubtedly magic ones.



THERE WAS THE GREAT ANIMAL, UNCAGED, IN THE GARDEN

mother. These irons were always hot, and, besides that, they ironed all by themselves, needing merely to be placed on the table, when away they went across the linen or cotton things like mad. They acted just as if they were alive.

The widow was very rich, of course, but she still took in ironing, as had her grandmother, who had found these magical irons on her kitchen table one day and never discovered who had left them there.

At the corner of Main street was a house which had moving stairs, so that one never had to walk up to the top floors. Old Mrs. Wiggins lived there, and her story was that she had often and often wished for just such stairs, for she was very old and feeble. And lo! one day they had been placed in her house while she was out on the Common trying to catch her red hen.

Nothing was so strange to be believed in Witchtown, and, of course, everybody believed her tale.

Right back of her house was a deep hollow, in the centre of which was a pond, and this water was frozen during the entire year. No matter how hot the day, you might find boys and girls skating here in the summer, and often men cutting the thick ice, which was frozen again next day. Flowers and grasses grew close to the shore, and it was perhaps the most marvelous of all the Witchtown sights.

On the back road lived Peter Gooks, the cobbler, who owned a cheap glass lamp, which, however, was bewitched, for it never went out or lost any oil. Day and night it burned away steadily, as Peter toiled or slept, and yet oil or wick were never renewed.

Once little Jack Spangle, who was the worst boy in Witchtown, stole this lamp and hid it in a culvert under the road, but it was back at Peter's house within an hour, which alone proved that it possessed magical qualities.

With all such wonders as these, it is plain that the village could be considered out of the common, but there were many others just as remarkable.

There was Silas Beach, who had a suit of clothes that was always in the extreme of the style, making him the most noticeable man in the place, for most of the people dressed very plainly; but this was not all—these clothes never wore out or got soiled! Silas suddenly discovered, one afternoon as he was walking home, that he was thus fashionably dressed, but he never learned how it had happened.

Even when he went to New York he was stared at, for never had there been such admirable clothes. Tailors used to stop him and inquire where he had them made, and then got angry when he explained how they had suddenly fitted themselves to him.

Now, you must not imagine that the people weren't constantly pondering upon the mystery of all these strange things and always trying to discover what caused them to happen. For many years the wisest and smartest had sought to solve the riddle, but no one had come nearer than guessing that it was the work of fairies or witches.

In all these years there had come to be formed a sort of uneasy suspicion that the neighborhood of the Thunder Rock was the source of many queer happenings, but just exactly why or how nobody could guess.

The most remarkable of all the occurrences was the mysterious disappearance of men and women, who vanished suddenly and never returned again. For a century this had been happening, yet no one could explain it, and always these people who were lost disappeared from sight or were last seen in the neighborhood of the ship on the Common.

Nobody had ever seen anything happen; they simply vanished, to appear no more. Search failed to reveal any traces of them anywhere. Sometimes it was a boy or girl, again it was a man or woman who was thus taken away; and, curiously enough, it had long been noticed that those who disappeared were always the ones who disliked Franklin or the wild girls and shiftless men, although now and then the very best citizens had thus been taken. It was the greatest and most puzzling problem of all the many riddles in the place.

The village school was the admiration of the whole country, and children were sent there from other towns because of its reputation, for the pupils were celebrated for their amazing learning and deportment.

This had been the case ever since Victor Freisinger had taught the school, and it was supposed that he possessed some secret power over children. He, however, knew that when he first came to teach school in Witchtown the pupils had been the worst he had ever handled, but suddenly all had changed and they became docile, studious and with such astonishing powers of memory that it was never necessary to keep school more than half a day, as by noon every lesson had been recited without a single error.

Out of school these same pupils were as wild, noisy and rough as any others, which made it all so strange to see them so obedient, gentle and studious within the little red-walled house. They wondered at it themselves, but gave up to the charm, whatever it was, without resisting, diligently studied all the morning and then spent the rest of the day playing on the ship, skating, swimming, roaming through the woods and fields with all the noise and antics of monkeys.

Chief among these lads was Herman Wirz. First in his class, never missing a recitation, never tardy, and perfect in deportment in school, no boy was fonder of play outside. Yet he was, perhaps, really more thoughtful and more observing than other lads, even more than many grown people are, and thus it came about that he solved the great problem that was worrying the village.

Herman never came upon anything strange without investigating it and thinking it over, and he had become accustomed to seeking for causes of things instead of merely passing them off as unusual. He was the favorite scholar, and Mr. Freisinger loved to walk with him in the woods and fields or lie in the grass and discuss the queer things of Witchtown.

The teacher had confessed that he had thought the school one of the bewitched places, and admitted that he had in his desperation and disgust at his scholars' misconduct often wished for a change, but he could not tell how it had really happened that his school had become a model one so suddenly and had thus remained.

That his pupils loved him he well knew, and when they asked him to play at being captain of the ship he was delighted, for, after all, he was only twenty-one and there's a good deal of a boy left in a man at that age, and even later.

He was sometimes the pirate captain, and again a captain of a man-of-war chasing pirates and slavers, and was as jolly a commander as any boy could desire.

One afternoon, after they had grown tired of being pirates, a lad proposed that one of the crew should be marooned, which means left on a desert island. So Bert Hayes was selected as the victim and Thunder Rock as the island upon which he was to be left.

He was escorted there by a guard, and when they returned to the ship he pretended to be overwhelmed with grief at his sad fate, yet while the boat's crew were still climbing aboard they noticed that he had left the rock, although he was expected to remain there for them to return. They were angry at him for giving in and tiring so soon, and when they came aboard they told the captain just what they thought of Bert Hayes.

Now it happened that Herman Wirz had been standing in the bow of the ship looking directly down at Bert, and he knew that he had not run away at all. He simply vanished into thin air in a twinkling! Even while Herman looked at him he melted and disappeared. Herman was so startled that for several minutes, while all the boys were angrily discussing Bert's retreat, he did not realize the full significance of the boy's disappearance.

When all of the others had gone home in great disgust, leaving him there with Mr. Freisinger, it suddenly flashed upon him that here was the explanation of all the mysterious departures that had taken place for so many years. At first he was inclined to impart his suspicions to the school-teacher, but after a moment's thought he decided to test the matter fully before letting anybody into his confidence.

So when he had walked nearly home with Mr. Freisinger he went back to the black shining rock. After walking all around it, as he had done many a time before, but this time speculating upon its magical qualities, he said to himself:

"If it is magical, it must act upon whoever touches it or stands upon it, for Bert vanished when he was on its top. Maybe making a wish on it causes everything to happen, for people have always said that this neighborhood is queer. I've read of wishing-caps and wishing-carpetts and purses, but perhaps there are wishing-stones, too. I'll soon settle that!"

He seated himself on the stone.

"Now, perhaps, I am about to solve the whole problem. If it's a wishing-stone," said he, "those people who have got all the wonderful things in the village have wished for them here and forgotten it, so that when they went home they were so surprised that they didn't remember where they made a wish. Now I must wish for something right here that I can see, so that I can have positive proof."

He thought for a while and then said:

"I wish that a pond of water, deep enough to float her, was all around the ship."

Even while he spoke he smiled, for it all seemed so impossible, but then he rubbed his eyes, for it had happened! There lay the ship floating in a pond that was just large enough to compass her, and, even then, the gentle wind was pushing her bows against the grass, a few feet from him.

"Gracious!" he cried, "I was right! It is a wishing-stone. I wish somebody could tell me how the ship came here at all!"

He heard a voice, and, turning, saw an old man in ancient costume that seemed made of red leather, who was bowing gravely to him. The man said:

"In response to your wish I am sent to explain that many years ago one named Elvizar Reubens sat there where you are, and, being a sailor, wished he had a ship. When he found this vessel there on the Common he jumped to the conclusion that he was bewitched, and fled the village without telling anyone of the matter. That is all there is to it."

"Well, it's very simple," replied Herman, "and so, I suppose, would be all of the mysterious happenings."

"You are quite right," responded the man in leather.

"But about the strange and mysterious disappearances?" exclaimed Herman.

"All were those who happened to wish themselves away from here. Some yearned to be in a cooler climate on hot nights; others, in winter, wished to be in the tropics; all wanted a change and they got it."

"Goodness! But they must have been surprised!" cried Herman.

"They certainly were. How it happened that none of them ever came back I don't know," added the old man. "I never investigated. I suppose they were too well contented, having had their wish fulfilled."

"Well, now that I have solved the problem, what would you advise me to do? Shall I tell everybody about it?" asked Herman.

"I would advise you to remain silent, for if it is known that this is a wishing-stone there will never be content or peace in the village thereafter. All will be constantly seeking it to wish for things, trouble will occur frequently, and the whole world will invade the place seeking for a chance to make a wish on the magic stone. War might even come of it when foreign nations learn of its presence here!"

"I'll soon settle all that!" exclaimed Herman, "for I shall promptly wish the stone in our cellar!"

"That would be a very good idea, for then there would be no more trouble!" said the old man. "For it has caused much distress, you know, in times past. Men with families have been snatched away from their homes where they were sadly needed through making a wish, and often nothing but trouble has followed a wish fulfilled."

"Then here goes," said Herman. "I am much obliged to you for explaining it all to me."

"Well, first wish me away again or I'll have difficulty in returning," said the old man, smiling blandly.

"I wish you back where you came from!" cried Herman, and the man vanished at once. "Now I wish this stone in the corner of our cellar," he added, and before he could take another breath he was in the cellar, still upon the stone. There he sat pondering for awhile, and then, seeing that the

STRANGE HAPPENINGS, FOR MANY YEARS, KEPT THE PEOPLE MYSTIFIED AND GAVE THE TOWN ITS NAME, ACCI- DENTALLY EXPLAINED AT LAST

Thunder Stone occupied far more space than he had expected, he said:

"Why not make the stone smaller?"

This was instantly wished for and accomplished, and now the stone was but two feet across. While he was still looking at it his mother entered in great excitement, and said:

"Oh, Herman, have you noticed what had happened? The house has grown as large as the Town Hall! We are at last bewitched, just as I feared!"

"No, I did it!" answered Herman. "Did it with the wishing-stone?"

Then he told her all about it, and she promptly sat down on the stone and wished for a new range in the kitchen!

She ran up at once to see if she had it, and came flying back to wish for linoleum on the kitchen floor, rugs all over the house, more closets in each room and more windows, a new bathtub, new curtains and bed-linen, and then settled down to ask for dresses for the girls, underclothes for Mr. Wirz, to have her rheumatism cured, a patent carpet sweeper, a horse and carriage, new spectacles, then, on second thought, restored eyesight, and, finally, to have her mother come at once from Frogtown to visit her.

I suppose she would have wished for hours had she not heard her mother's voice in the hall, evincing great excitement at finding herself there. She then jumped up and ran to explain it all.

When Mr. Wirz came home at all had to be explained to him, and the way he went to work to wish was a marvel. He had wished the mortgage off the house, a new roof, a new furnace, a cellar full of coal, a safe full of money and government bonds, a stable with horses and cows, a line of trolley cars through the village and Mrs. Wirz's mother back home again within twenty minutes!

He rose from the wishing-stone a rich man, also president of the trolley line and the bank, as well as Mayor of Witchtown.

Every few minutes either father or mother would return and make a new wish as they happened to think of something, and it was a very busy time, and one filled with pleasure and excitement.

Several weeks went by and pretty nearly everything had been wished for by the family, when one day Herman desired a big menagerie to be placed in the corner lot.

Of course, it came at once, and he was very happy for some days, but then he yearned for novelties. All the animals were commonplace; nothing, no matter how rare, but was there, yet after he had grown accustomed to them they seemed very ordinary and he began to want some of the extinct animals that roamed the earth ages ago, in the days when all the rocks were made. So he wished for megatheriums, pterodactyls and all the other things with names a yard long and so ugly that they made people shiver to look at them.

He was always careful to wish them into proper cages, but one afternoon when he was looking over his books for more he happened to be in the garden and came upon a picture of the Dinosaurus, and after reading that the animal was seventy-nine feet long, he immediately ran into the cellar, seated himself and wished for one without thinking of a cage for him.

The Dinosaurus appeared before one could say "Jack Robinson," filling the garden completely, overturning the palm trees, statues and fountains as it tried to make itself comfortable and looking around for something to eat. Herman ran up into the garden, but when he saw the Dinosaurus he leaped for the porch in terror and the animal saw him. It darted its head toward him, but Herman sprang indoors before it reached him.

Because it had such enormous teeth and gleaming eyes everybody thought it would devour all that it encountered, but it is very probable that it only ate trees or leaves and other vegetable food, yet I cannot say positively, and I myself would surely have run away with the rest had I been there.

It lumbered along the street, scaring horses and dogs, as well as men and women, and into every open door it poked its head, seeking for something. I know not what. It upturned trees, upset lamp-posts, stoops, fences, pumps, and every time it wagged its tail it swept away something, uttering the most appalling grunts and squeals all the time. Seeing a haystack in Mr. Tuttle's yard it pushed over the fence and ate it up in two minutes!

All the inhabitants of Witchtown were fleeing for the woods now, and the terror was beyond description.

Herman, I regret to say, did not recover from his fright for nearly an hour, but at a safe distance watched the dread creature prowl about the village until at last he turned and approached the Wirz house. Then Herman fled to the cellar and, seating himself on the stone, promptly wished the Dinosaurus back to where he came from, and then, to the relief of all the inhabitants, he suddenly disappeared.

Now, of course, in the light of what happened, everybody blamed all the destruction wrought by the animal to the Wirz family, and although Herman immediately wished every bit of damage repaired at once, the occurrence left such a bitter feeling that Mr. Wirz felt it wherever he went, and so did Herman. Nobody would speak to the family except an angry reproach; and at last one day, in great bitterness, Mr. Wirz sat on the stone and said:

"I wish the house were moved to some other and more pleasant town."

Instantly they found themselves in new surroundings. They became my next door neighbors in this lovely village of Atlantic City, and that's how I came to know this story. But, alas for me, the cellar was not carried along with the house and the black stone was left behind!

Herman took a long journey to recover it, but he found only the cellar stripped clean of everything it had contained by the people of Franklin, who thus revenged themselves for the damage they had sustained from the Dinosaurus. Nobody ever heard of the magic stone again, but Herman learned that an old man in leather had been the very first one to go down into the cellar after the house had vanished, and he guessed that the Thunder Rock had been wished away by him to a safe place.

However, as the Wirz family is richer than anybody here, I think they do not much regret its loss, but I would have liked to have had just one chance at it, for I am sure that so nice a boy as Herman would have given as nice a man as I the privilege almost without asking. WALT McDUGALL.